A twenty year-old from Swansea, Mass., Elisha L. Buffington took a grand tour of Asia with his uncle Elisha D. Buffington and aunt Charlotte in 1894. Spending two months in Japan, the Buffingtons traveled through China and the Subcontinent, visiting the usual cultural and historic sites as well as more unusual voyages to the Himalayas.

Written carefully in two volumes (ca.381p.), Elisha L. Buffington’s diaries record the impressions of a twenty year-old from Swansea, Mass., during his first voyage to Asia. Although the diaries do not cover the entire trip, they record details of two months spent in Japan, including an eyewitness account of the Meiji earthquake in Tokyo, and interesting visits to Shanghai and Hong Kong, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and India. The diary ends on December 27, 1894, when the Buffingtons were at Delhi.

The collection is open for research.

English
acrobatic performances by kids eight or nine years old they rolled around standing on wooden globes one lay on his back and balanced a tall pole and another climbed the pole and then he balanced a ladder and a little fellow climbed that...

then went to the Nachi Cho the streets in which the prostitutes of Tokyo live as they have to have a license in Japan and when they get one they have to live in a certain district of this city. This street was about an hour’s ride from the hotel and is lined with tea houses from end to end with not a store in it. We went up into a tea house and looked down on the street quite soon a theatrical performance was wheeled in front of us and some girls dressed in gorgeous costumes danced for our benefit. The dancing was mostly by movements of the body and lasted about ten minutes when that one was wheeled along and after an intermission another came up entirely different from the preceding, then after this one had finished and a longer intermission had passed a group of singing girls came by or rather stopped in front and sang unluckily they stopped for refreshments and as it was getting late we were forced to leave them and came back to the hotel. As they do this free they must get their pay in the number which each individual ropes in for a piece. To look at the people walking by and at the play and finally at the police men present one would hardly imagine in what kind of a company he really was and it seems a little queer that that kind of thing should be protected by law.

The timing of the tour led to one of the Buffington’s more unusual experiences: the Meiji earthquake of October 1894 that damaged downtown Tokyo and the neighboring prefectures.

I began to notice that the bed trembled a little more than usual the thumping increased and I came to the conclusion that an earthquake was in progress when suddenly there came a mighty shake which seemed to be a combination of a longitudinal shake and a upheaval from beneath. The entire building seemed to rock from end to end and creak in every joint. I realized the truth of what I had heard a lady say about the bed going clear to the ceiling for I thought I went at least as far as that. Then to add to my excitement or rather amusement people rushed about calling in loud voices after a moment the cry of fire was raised... But I was to meet disappointment as there was no fire to be seen it was only a false alarm. The Earthquake seemed to be as if a giant had taken my bed and gently rocked it backwards and forwards and as a parting touch had given it a heave...

The earthquake was barely a bump in the road, however, and the Buffingtons went immediately back to the work of sightseeing.

After dinner went to visit Geku and on the way took in some wrestling by the Tokyo wrestlers. They are all very large men most of them full six feet tall broad and apparently brought up to the business they are the lowest class with no education and
but little better than beasts they wrestle with nothing but a band wound several times
around their bodies and start in a catch as catch can way but when they do get hold of
each other they make things shake and strain with the force which they show. They
wrestle for prizes at one time they brought out about thirty and had them go at it hap
hazard the one downing five men to get a prize that was fun and no mistake...

On November 2, the Buffingtons left from Nagasaki for Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Canton,
where Elisha found "the Chinese know how to make a bigger noise than we Americans do..."
During their brief two-week stay, Buffetton sensed some of the tensions that fed into the Boxer
Rebellion four years later. "The boat seems to be rather heavily armed," he wrote, "as they
sometimes have a mutiny on board and then they have to look out for their necks as the Chinese
sometimes murder everybody on board and run off with the booty..." Leaving that "queer city,
Hong Kong, the party traveled on to Singapore and Sri Lanka, visiting the usual tourist
destinations of botanical gardens and temples in Colombo and Kandy. Sailing to Calcutta, they
next headed north to Darjeeling and the mountain resort, The Woodlands, where Elisha hoped
to catch a view of the Himalayas:

When I got up this morning the Mount Everest range of Mountains was in full view
ahead. It was a magnificent sight to see their snow capped peaks... We arrived at the
end of our journey at about four o'clock and after a short walk up a steep incline which
tested the staying powers of the air we arrived at the woodlands where we were
welcomed by a nice fire and comfortable rooms. It was here that we got our first real
view of the mountains and all their glory which is great. Right across the valley about
fifty miles away but looking much nearer stretches a range of icy peaks. Mount Everest
itself is not visible being concealed by a range of hills. From the Hotel we can see the
plains fifty miles away and seven thousand feet below us but looking much nearer...

After visiting the Monkey and Golden Temples in Benares, the Deserted City and the Rajah’s
Palace, the Buffingtons headed to Lucknow and Delhi, where they arrived as the year expired.

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Buffingtons were at Delhi.

Well educated, young and impressionable, Buffetton was fascinated with the seemingly exotic
cultures, writing about the people and their activities as much as the buildings and cities.
Administrative information

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SCUA houses several collections relating to American travel in Meiji-era Japan, including:

- William Penn Brooks Papers (RG 3/1 B76)
- William S. Clark Papers (RG 3/1 C63)
- Benjamin Smith Lyman Papers (MS 190)

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